

ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
(Second Dutch Reformed Church)
817 North Seventh Street
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-6723
PA-6723

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH (Second Dutch Reformed Church)

HABS No. PA-6723

Location: 817 North Seventh Street, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County,
Pennsylvania

**Present Owner/
Occupant:** St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church

Present Use: Russian Orthodox church

Significance: St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church holds significance both as a prominent Greco-Roman Revival building in Philadelphia's Northern Liberties neighborhood and as a tangible link to a period in American history especially characterized by successive waves of European immigration. Completed in 1854 on a design attributed to noted Philadelphia architect, Stephen Decatur Button, a group of German Protestants commissioned the fashionable, temple-like church for their newly-formed congregation. As implemented, the design was a competent adaptation of a popular classical revival prototype based ultimately on the famed, first-century BCE Maison Carrée in France. Although Greco-Roman Revivalism was not limited to the United States, such an architectural statement can still be read as an outward manifestation of the process of cultural assimilation and exchange faced by all immigrant groups as they shaped their lives in this country. As much as the building's monumental scale worked to bestow a degree of gravitas on one of the city's youngest congregations, itself composed mainly of recent arrivals, its conventional Greco-Roman form articulately conveyed a corporate desire to be thought of as "American."

In 1917, the building passed from the founding congregation to a new one composed mainly of Russian immigrants, commencing its reinvention as St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church. While the congregants' desire to be American was likely no less intense than that of their predecessors, the changes they made to the existing sanctuary were principally directed toward preserving and reinforcing Russian religious practices and traditions. The church has continued to serve as an active point of intersection between American and Russian cultures up to the present.

Historian: David Amott, Summer 2006.

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. **Date of erection:** 1852-54
2. **Architect:** It has been suggested that the Second Dutch Reformed congregation secured noted nineteenth-century, Philadelphia architect, Stephen Decatur Button (1813-1897) for the design their church building, although this attribution has yet to be conclusively documented.¹ Button was the architect for the nearby and exactly contemporaneous First Dutch Reformed Church of the Northern Liberties, which was both Greco-Roman in execution and similarly featured a large-scale, full temple front on its street facade.²

Button's training and career followed a similar, aspirational trajectory to many other antebellum architects in the United States in that he started out in the skilled building trades before making the consequential jump to self-identification as an "architect." He began his practical education with a five-year carpenter's apprenticeship in the 1820s, which was followed by a move to New York City and two years training in an architectural office.³ Eventually, Button came to settle and pursue architecture mostly in the region around Philadelphia and parts of New Jersey, although the State Capitol at Montgomery Alabama, a commission won through a design competition, might be considered his most prominent work.⁴ As with other successful, mid-nineteenth-century architects, he needed knowledge and a clear command of the numerous, competing, eclectic stylistic modes whose collective variety defined the period's architecture. His list of known works cover a myriad of building types, which further suggest an inherent flexibility in Button's approach to design. If an accurate attribution, Button's Second Dutch Reformed Church in Philadelphia's Northern Liberties neighborhood came early in his career and was a highly competent application of Greco-Roman design ideas, which reached their zenith in national popularity around 1850.

It should also be noted that Button was also an active player in the professionalization of the field of architecture, as architects sought to establish standards in an effort to distinguish themselves from builders or contractors. A hint of irony might be affixed to this impetus given that many of the newly minted (and frequently self-proclaimed) architects by necessity started out in the building trades—no American school of architecture existed at the time and detailed knowledge of construction could only be

¹ See: Roger Moss and Tom Crane (photographer), *Historic Sacred Places of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 92-95.

² Ibid.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all information about Button is drawn from Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects, 1700-1930* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co. for the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 1985), "Button, Stephen Decatur," 122-25.

⁴ Constructed in 1846-48, Button's building was, for the most part, lost in a devastating fire only three years after completion.

attained through apprenticeships. In this quest for professionalization, architects were in most cases less questioning a traditional builder's skill in building, but rather his ability to visualize and create "architecture." A group of prominent New York architects made the first attempts to professionalize in the 1830s, followed by a steady spread of interest throughout the country that eventually led to the benchmark founding of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 1857. Button was involved in the establishment of a similar, local organization in 1861, the Pennsylvania Institute of Architects (later the Philadelphia Chapter of the AIA).

3. Original and Subsequent Owners and Occupants:

1854-1917	Second Dutch Reformed Church
1917-present	St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church

- 4. Original Plans and Construction:** Between 1852 and 1854, the newly-formed Second Dutch Reformed congregation constructed an imposing church near the corner of Brown and Seventh streets "whose comfort was not...surpassed in this [Northern Liberties] section of the city."⁵ While this building presently maintains a solitary profile in the streetscape, at the time of construction, the surrounding neighborhood was jammed with brick and frame one- and two-story workers' houses, artisan workshops, and factories.⁶ Rising out of these surroundings, the church's size, distinguished architecture, and rich finishes would have certainly guaranteed visual prominence. An 1854 description of the building's exterior published in the *Christian Intelligencer* stated: "The building is of brick, rough-cast in imitation of granite...The front presents a majestic appearance, having six Ionic fluted columns, supporting the entablature, with solid granite steps thirty-six feet in length under the portico leading up to...three commodious doors in front."⁷

Dedicating several paragraphs to the "beautiful and imposing audience chamber" on the church's first floor, the *Christian Intelligencer's* description records that the room originally featured 34'-0" high ceilings, mahogany pews upholstered with "figured crimson damask," and extensive woodwork painted white with gilded highlights. The

⁵ "Second Reformed Dutch Church, (Dr. Berg's), Dedicatory Services," *Christian Intelligencer* 24 (9 Mar. 1854): 142.

⁶ For period depictions of the Second Dutch Reformed Church's neighborhood, see Ernest Hexamer and William Locher, *Maps of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1859); G. W. Baist, *Baist's Property Atlas of the City and County of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1895); Elvino V. Smith, *Property Atlas of the 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, & 17 Wards of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1909); George W. and Walter S. Bromley, *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia (Central), South Street to Lehigh Avenue, From Actual Surveys and Official Plans* (Philadelphia, 1922). The Internet site www.philageohistory.org offers and extensive on-line collection of historic Philadelphia fire insurance maps and atlases spanning the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the description of the building at the time of completion is drawn from: "Second Reformed Dutch Church, (Dr. Berg's), Dedicatory Services," 142.

room also boasted a large organ with “richly ornamented columns and cappings,” also painted white and trimmed in gold. It was claimed that the sanctuary’s most striking features were the ceiling and wall frescoes painted by Italian artist Joseph Uberti depicting the Four Evangelists and scenes from the New Testament.⁸ Designed to impress the visitor with its obvious sumptuousness, the church was nonetheless also admired for its “simple architecture,” which, according to one of the church’s dedicatory speakers, recalled the “first Christian churches...[instead of] the too prevalent fashion of [using the] gloomy, florid Gothic, so characteristic of Popery.”⁹ This account also explained that the church’s raised basement contained a Sabbath-school room, a lecture room, “capable of holding some 450 or 500 persons,” a trustees’ room, and the pastor’s study “connecting by a stairway with the pulpit in the audience chamber above.” Once completed and dedicated, the finely-crafted church was subject to few major interior or exterior changes up through the time it was sold to the newly-founded Russian Orthodox church of St. Nicholas.

5. **Alterations and Additions:** When the St. Nicholas congregation purchased the church building in 1917, they immediately set out to take a space designed for the religious practices of Protestant Christianity and adapt it to support the Russian Orthodox liturgy. Among the earliest alterations would have been the construction the requisite iconostasis, or wall of icons, which separated the church’s altar from the rest of the sanctuary.

Sometime later, in the 1940s, itinerant Russian artist George Novikov (sometimes spelled Novikoff) created an elaborate cycle of wall murals, icon panels, and stenciled borders; the artist also embellished the sanctuaries of nearby Russian Orthodox churches of St. Andrew’s and St Michael the Archangel.¹⁰ In repainting the sanctuary, Novikov retained all of Uberti’s ceiling paintings, but covered the walls with depictions of Russian saints. Changes to the church to support Orthodox tradition extended to the removal of the pews creating the customary space for worshippers to stand during the services. The pipe organ was also taken out since no instruments accompany Orthodox choirs during their liturgy. Other notable decorative changes include the faux-marbling of portions of the sanctuary’s iconostasis and much of the interior wall paneling by church parishioner Simeon Filipovich Frederick and the crafting of large, stained-glass windows by another parishioner, Mathias Von Reutlinger.¹¹

⁸ About two years after painting the Second Dutch Reformed Church, Joseph Uberti assisted Constantino Brumidi with the murals in the United States Capitol. For more information about Joseph Uberti, see: “Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol,” *Website of the U.S. Printing Office*, 2000, accessed online, 7 Aug. 2006, http://www.access.gpo.gov/congress/senate/brumidi/Brumidi_AppB.pdf.

⁹ “Second Reformed Dutch Church, (Dr. Berg’s), Dedicatory Services,” 142.

¹⁰ George Novikov signed one of the murals behind the church’s iconostasis and dated it “1949,” offering a likely date for the other murals by the artist in the church. Regrettably, little is known about Novikov. Reportedly, the artist traveled extensively and painted the interiors of many Russian Orthodox churches found along the East Coast. See historical reports for St. Andrew’s Russian Orthodox Cathedral (HABS No. PA-6721) and St. Michael the Archangel Russian Orthodox Church (HABS No. PA-6722) for more information about Novikov’s work.

¹¹ Michael Peleszak, interview with author, 23 Jul. 2006, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Notes in possession of author.

The exterior of St. Nicholas remained largely unaltered until 1974 when much of the building was stuccoed and two of the three original front doors were removed. This decision was an extremely controversial one, and caused such conflict between the congregation and the Philadelphia Historical Commission that the city removed the church from its historic registry.¹²

B. Historical Context:

Philadelphia's Northern Liberties

Located outside William Penn's orthogonal grid for Philadelphia, as published in 1683, the Northern Liberties purportedly acquired its name from its "liberty lands" granted free of charge to those who purchased plots of land within the boundaries of the colonial city.¹³ The 1854 Act of Consolidation had allowed the City of Philadelphia to annex the Northern Liberties District and twenty-nine nearby, previously independent townships, boroughs, and districts comprising Philadelphia County.¹⁴ Located immediately to the north of Penn's city along the Delaware River, the Northern Liberties had been among the earliest areas settled and it rapidly developed during the first half of the nineteenth century with increased industrialization. This development began at the banks of the Delaware River and moved inland, occupying most of the district's open space by the fourth decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁵

In her writings regarding the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century conditions in the neighborhood, historian Susan H. Anderson observes that the Northern Liberties "was never a fashionable [neighborhood]...Rather it was a center for artisans and small businessmen who lived along the unpaved muddy streets in small crowded houses and in little 'courts' and alleys behind the numbered streets."¹⁶ Anderson's description of the Northern Liberties can, in great part, be used to describe the district's later nineteenth century conditions as well. Its proximity to central Philadelphia, large amount of housing stock, inexpensive rents, numerous warehouses and factories, and ethnically diverse

¹² For more information, see: "St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church" file, Philadelphia Historical Commission, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (hereafter **PHC**), and Thomas Hine, "Landmarks in Jeopardy, Historic Buildings Could Lose Protection," *Philadelphia Inquirer* 16 Aug. 1974, sec. B: 1.

¹³ For a period history and description of the Northern Liberties District, see: Rudolph J. Walther, *Happenings in ye Olde Philadelphia 1680-1900* (Philadelphia: Walther Printing House, 1925), 6, 13.

¹⁴ The portion of the Northern Liberties comprising the modern neighborhood bearing that name was known as the Northern Liberties District from 1803, when it was fully incorporated as an entity carved from Northern Liberties Township, until the Act of Consolidation in 1854.

¹⁵ See: Henry S. Tanner, *Map of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1836). Map accessible on the Internet at <http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps2656.html>.

¹⁶ Susan H. Anderson, *The Most Splendid Carpet* (Philadelphia: National Park Service, 1978), 33.

culture offered Philadelphia's poorer citizens or newly-arrived immigrants an ideal place to locate and build a life.

A social and physical hallmark of the Northern Liberties area throughout much of the nineteenth century was its numerous religious, social, and professional organizations, many of which were created by and for the district's immigrants. Such groups thrived in Philadelphia's Northeast where, according to one historian "skilled English workers...had their own unions...[while] the German workers of the district fostered a secession of benefit associations and building and loan societies, and the newly arrived Poles imitated the Germans in this respect...the Irish supported athletic and ethnic clubs as well as building and loan associations...[and] old Americans maintained their enthusiasm for fraternal organizations."¹⁷ For all ethnic groups, churches provided a vital institution and venue for social interaction in addition to spiritual and professional development.¹⁸

The Church Building and Its Two Ethnic Congregations

The Second Dutch Reformed Church of the Northern Liberties was founded on March 29, 1852.¹⁹ The *Christian Intelligencer* explained in a March 9, 1854 article that Reverend Joseph F. Berg established the congregation because he "contemplated a change of ecclesiastical relations by withdrawing from the German Reformed and uniting with the Dutch Church, on account of the great principles he had been contending for with such self-sacrificing zeal and devotion."²⁰ It was presented retrospectively that Reverend Berg believed the German Reformed Church "was surrendering too much of the difference that marked the distinction between the Protestant and Roman Catholic Church...[including] the introduction of a liturgy, the wearing of the gown in the pulpit, anything that even intimated the real presence of the body of Christ at the Communion."²¹ Taking many members of the German Reformed congregation with him, Reverend Berg and his followers allied themselves with the Dutch Reformed movement and founded a new church upon the motto "'*Jehova-Nissi!* In the name of God we set up our banner."²²

¹⁷ Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 180.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Historical Sermon Preached on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Organization of the Second Reformed Church, Philadelphia, PA by the Pastor, Rev. W.H. Williamson, Sunday, March 30, 1902*, (pamphlet), St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church file, PHC.

²⁰ "Second Reformed Dutch Church (Dr. Berg's) Dedicatory Services," 142; see also: [Williamson], *Historical Sermon*, 2. For more information regarding the German Reformed Movement, see: *United Church of Christ History and Program: That They May All Be One* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1991), and a brief summary of the movement in the historical report for St. Michael the Archangel Russian Orthodox Church (HABS No. PA-6722).

²¹ [Williamson], *Historical Sermon*, 3-4.

²² "Second Reformed Dutch Church (Dr. Berg's) Dedicatory Services," 142, for quote. A concrete explanation as to why the congregation chose to affiliate with the Dutch Reformed Church over other Christian sects

While the formation of the new church was somewhat dramatic, after they came to occupy their new building, the Second Dutch Reformed congregation quietly passed the next several decades in worship and fellowship. Yet, as time passed, many of the church's members moved from the Northern Liberties as the neighborhood's demographics changed from being primarily German to primarily Slavic. In 1917, dwindling membership led to the sale of the church to a group of Slavic immigrants who had recently separated from the nearby St. Andrew's Russian Orthodox Cathedral.²³ After the division of the St. Andrew's congregation, the new members of St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church met for a short time in a Methodist chapel located at 509 North Fifth Street before purchasing the Second Dutch Reformed Church on November 22, 1917.²⁴ A century-and-a-half after its construction, St. Nicholas Church remains one of the more architecturally distinguished and prominent buildings in Northern Liberties and its second resident congregation, as with its first, offers a spiritual and social center for residents in the neighborhood and beyond.

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. **Architectural character:** This Greco-Roman Revival church building was conceived as a modified classical temple, a form that became popular during the antebellum period, particularly in the design of urban churches. On the front, the temple-like form is fully articulated through a monumental hexastyle, Ionic portico with full entablature and pediment, while on the lateral walls, formerly hemmed in by adjacent buildings, the columns are more abstractly suggested through the alternation of window recesses and simple pilasters. This type of temple—characterized generally by a raised podium and prominent stair, and a full, front-facing portico whose pattern of columniation continues on the lateral and rear walls with engaged columns or pilasters—has a specific ancient source in the Maison Carrée, constructed in Roman Nîmes (France) during the first century BCE. Thomas Jefferson is credited with introducing the Maison Carrée prototype to America with his design for the Virginia State Capitol (1785-88). As well-illustrated by St. Nicholas and a number of other similar churches in antebellum

does not exist. The 1854 *Christian Intelligencer* account of the congregation and its new church building claims that their association with the Dutch Reformed Church allowed the congregation “to sustain their beloved pastor, and share his trials and triumphs while doing battle for the great truths and principles of our common Protestant Christianity.”

²³ This division was primarily the result of arguments regarding the legal ownership of St. Andrew's Cathedral building and the confusion created by the 1917 Russian Revolution. For additional information, see the written history for St. Andrew's Russian Orthodox Cathedral (HABS No. PA-6721).

²⁴ Charles W. Dubin to unknown recipient, 1917, “St. Andrew's Cathedral” folder, Urban Archives, Paley Library, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. According to a commemorative history written in honor of the church's sixtieth anniversary, St. Nicholas Church was purchased for \$22,700. *St. Nicholas Eastern Orthodox Church, 60th Anniversary* (Philadelphia: St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, 1977), 1.

Philadelphia, this prototype offered architectural distinctiveness within the limits of parish construction budgets as well as the confines of typical urban lots.

2. Condition of fabric: Good

- B. Description of Exterior:** The form of the Second Dutch Reformed Church features a monumental street façade dominated by a portico defined by six Ionic columns, and full entablature and triangular pediment. The granite stairs rise in two flights up from the sidewalk, one set in front of the columns, whose bases rest on an intermediary “landing,” and the other set behind the columns. These steps originally directed parishioners up to the church’s three large entrance doors, of which only one survives today. As originally completed, light-colored plaster, scored to resemble cut stone, covered the building’s exterior walls; in 1974, this material was replaced with a modern stucco.

The lateral walls (north and south elevations) are divided into seven vertical bays formerly defined by Doric pilasters, but becoming somewhat more abstracted with the introduction of modern stucco sheathing to the exterior in 1974. Six of the seven bays contain windows; the seventh bay, adjacent to the portico holds a blind rectangular recess. The five middle bays contain the windows that open onto the sanctuary. In the twentieth century, conventional, divided-light, double-hung windows in these bays were replaced with ones of stained glass, designed by parishioner Mathias Von Reutlinger.²⁵ A single door or window opens onto the raised basement in each of the bays.

Originally hidden by neighboring buildings, the church’s back (east) elevation appears never to have been plastered. The wall is laid in American bond and is featureless, except for molding that echoes the pediment at the front and a single, small window lighting the building’s attic.

- C. Description of the Interior:** The overall spatial organization of St. Nicholas is typical of many church buildings constructed in urban neighborhoods, featuring a raised basement containing a fully lighted and ventilated social hall surmounted by double-height sanctuary raised up from the street. In addition to a social hall, the ground-floor also holds a church office, storage rooms, and a vestibule with a stair up to the sanctuary.

In contrast to the utilitarian appearance of the ground floor rooms, the first-floor sanctuary is richly decorated. Its most notable feature is the three-tiered wooden iconostasis, which dominates the room and both literally and symbolically separates the altar from the rest of the sanctuary. Immense in scale, the iconostasis features thirty-four images of saints and biblical scenes arranged in three registers, gilded central (or “royal”) doors, and is finished with pink-and-grey faux marbling.

The walls surrounding the iconostasis are painted a deep mauve, and display a number of images of Orthodox saints that were painted onto canvas sheets attached to the wall. The

²⁵ Michael Peleszak, interview with author, 23 Jul. 2006.

rear (west) wall of the sanctuary is embellished with a large mural depicting the first baptism of Russians into the Orthodox faith as ordered by Prince Vladimir of Kiev. Set below this mural is a large gallery used by the choir, decorated along its front with colorful, stenciled designs that correspond to those framing images elsewhere in the sanctuary. The coved ceiling is also covered with paintings that include representations of the four evangelists, four images of New Testament scenes, elaborate stenciled borders, large swaths of painted, brocade-like patterns, and four depictions of traditional, six-winged Orthodox angels positioned at each of the corners. The dynamic and colorful quality of the interior decoration is heightened by the tall stained-glass windows piercing the north and south walls.

PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

The project was co-sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service and the Society of Architectural Historians, as the Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship. The 2006 documentation of St. Andrew's Russian Orthodox Cathedral, St. Michael the Archangel Russian Orthodox Church, and St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by HABS, Richard O'Connor, Acting Chief of Heritage Documentation Programs; under the direction of Catherine C. Lavoie, Acting Chief of HABS. The project leader was HABS historian James A. Jacobs. The project was completed during the summer of 2006 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow David Amott (University of Delaware).

APPENDIX A: PHOTOGRAPHS

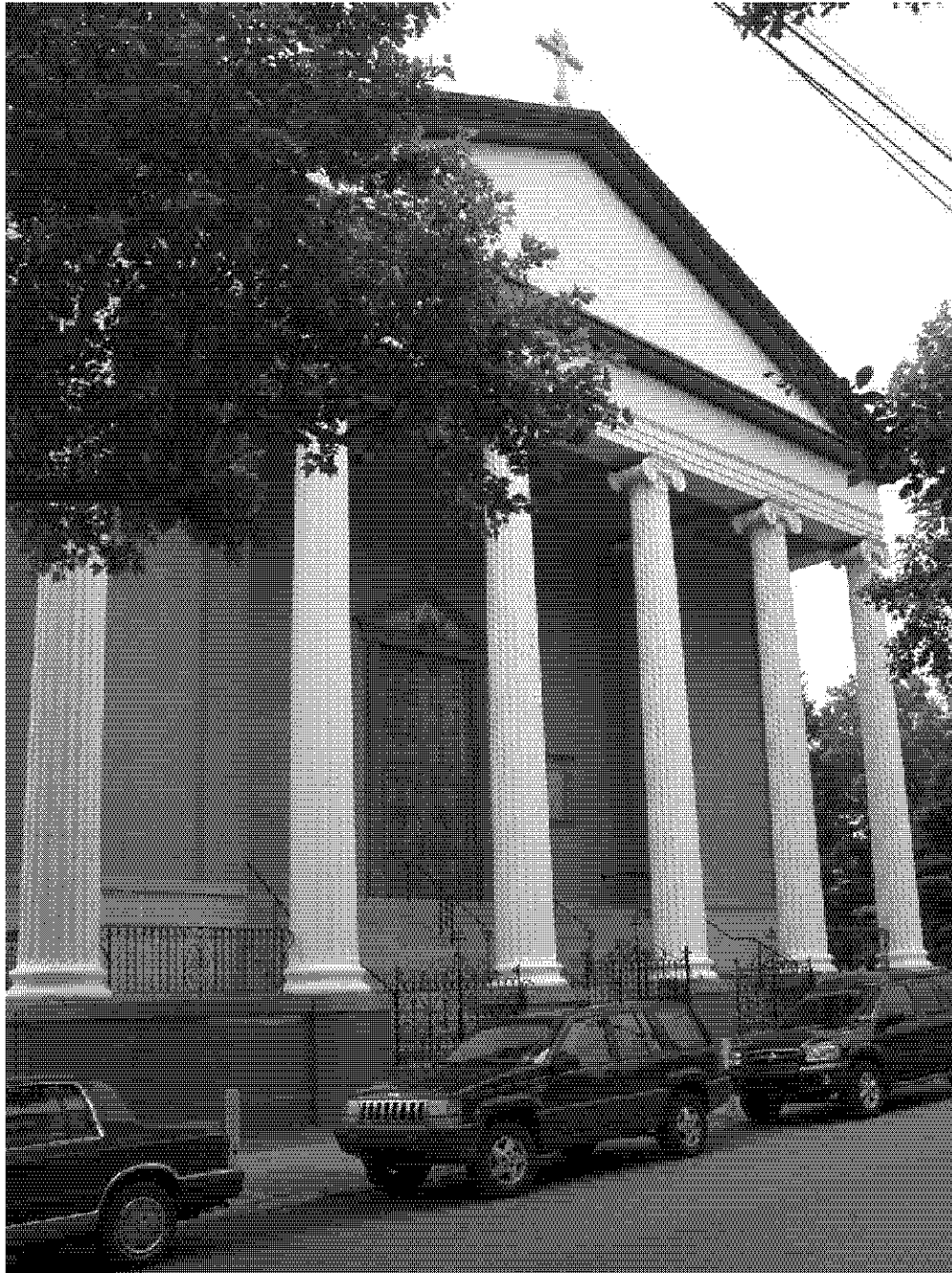


Fig. 1. Principal (west) elevation, looking southeast.
David Amott, photographer, 2006.



Fig. 2. Interior view, iconostasis, looking east.
David Amott, photographer, 2006.